

The Fifth St. Clair County Courthouse: Neoclassicism on the Prairie

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Throughout its history, St. Clair County has had six courthouses with different architectural designs. The fifth was, by far, the most influential architecturally. An example of Greek Revival architecture, it outstripped all past and present St. Clair County courthouses in its beauty. It also caused the most controversy. This beautiful building embodied the ideas of democracy and justice through its architecture.

The first county courthouse for St. Clair was not in Belleville, but in Cahokia. It had been built originally for a private dwelling. The building was of the French colonial, log cabin style, with the logs placed vertically instead of horizontally. In 1794, when St. Clair County was established, a group of judges from the lower circuit court bought the cabin to be used as a county courthouse. They donated it to the county on December 12, 1794. It remained the county courthouse for the next 24 years.

In 1814 the county seat was moved to Compton Hill, which later was renamed Belleville. The county leaders believed that the seat should have a more central location and made plans to build a new St. Clair County courthouse. It was completed on September 10, 1817, as the county's third. The county brought the furnishings from the Cahokia courthouse to decorate the new one.

While the new courthouse was being completed, the county government used a long, narrow, one-story log cabin that stood on the public square as the second courthouse. It was the house of a man named George Blair. He had donated the land on which the new courthouse was being built and offered his log cabin to the county so they would have an office while the new

one was under construction. Blair's log cabin acted as the county's second, but unofficial, courthouse.

By 1827, the third courthouse had become too small to conduct business properly. The county completed the construction of its fourth courthouse, a federal style brick building that stood on the public square, just west of the third. Finished in 1833, the building was considered large and up-to-date for its time, but the rapidly growing county required an even larger one by the mid-1850s.

St. Clair made plans to build yet another courthouse. The building displayed such beautiful architecture that it remained the pride of the county for 111 years.

The construction of the fifth St. Clair County courthouse was completed in 1861, but its "architectural lineage can be traced back to 1785 when Thomas Jefferson and C. L. Clerisseau designed the Virginia State Capitol," according to a newspaper account. The two men based their Virginia design on a Roman temple in Nimes, France, and thus began the neoclassic era of American architecture. "The St. Clair County courthouse was a splendid example of this long tradition," according to architectural historian Frederick Koeper.

Its designer, Robert Mitchell, constructed the building entirely of materials from St. Clair County, excepting the slab stone floors that had been imported from Europe. Because of the materials of limestone, copper, iron, and cherry-colored brick, the building was considered to be fire-proof. The building's impressive two-story limestone pillars were topped with Corinthian capitols of carved stone and helped form the portico under which stood the building's podium. The inside of the building featured lofty ceilings and cantilevered cast-iron stairs.

When it was first built, the courthouse measured 60 feet by 90 feet. However, by 1893, as the population of the county continued to increase, more room was needed to administer the

county. In 1893, the county made some additions to the building, which doubled in size. Rather than constructing a new courthouse, St. Clair decided to make an addition, designed by architects Bailey and Kroener, that included side wings and a dome.

This architectural accomplishment dominated the county seat for 111 years until June 1972, when it was demolished to make way for a new county courthouse. The residents of St. Clair County, however, did not give up their historic landmark without a fight, once they realized it was in danger.

By the 1960s the building was outdated and too small. County officials decided they needed a new courthouse. On July 3, 1967, the City Council of Belleville gave the county permission to build the new St. Clair County Courthouse on the site of the existing one. In 1970 the Public Commission of St. Clair County officially decided to demolish the old courthouse. It was at this point that people in the county began to take steps to save the building. James D. Young and George Rogers led this group. It was decided that to save the building they would have to have it declared a landmark.

When the Belleville City Council finally called a public hearing on a proposal to declare the courthouse a landmark in March 1972, a circuit judge issued an injunction preventing the meeting. He made his ruling on the grounds that, "The Courthouse project was predicated on a July 3, 1967, resolution passed by the Belleville City Council approving the location of the new courthouse on the central city block that is bounded by the Public Square, West Main Street, South 1st Street, West Washington Street, and South Illinois Street. The commission had to rely on the Belleville resolution in order to market the bonds to finance the new program. If the commission could not rely on that resolution, it could never make any commitments."

The two men who had started the movement to save the courthouse, James D. Young and George Rogers, and their attorney, Ralph Stenger, were stunned by the ruling. They were thankful that the city council was able to declare the building a historic landmark despite the judge's decision.

Nonetheless, the Public Building Commission started demolishing the courthouse on May 9, 1972. This promptly provoked a lawsuit for damages and the demolition work was suspended until the issue could be settled, but no charges were filed because the landmark ordinance "did not contain a punishment clause." Though protesters claimed "it was a symbolic gesture to show the public who had control of the project," it seemed to be the result of a lack of communication between the Public Building Commission and the construction company that had been hired to raze the building.

During the suspension, the people pressed for the plan to redesign the new courthouse so it would include the oldest portion of the old courthouse. However, the idea had too many flaws, the biggest of which was that it would increase the cost of the project from 2.5 to 3 million dollars. In the end, the circuit court nullified the ordinance making the courthouse a historic landmark because it violated the due process and equal protection clauses of the federal and state constitutions. As of May 31, 1972, the construction company was allowed to begin demolishing the building.

Upon hearing the ruling, Young and Rogers appealed the case but encountered a major setback when the City Council repealed the landmark ordinance, the basis of all the petitioners' claims. Perhaps the city council repealed it because they realized they were too late to save the building; however, many petitioners believed the council was worried about Belleville's having to pay the damage costs of the building.

At 12:33 p.m. on June 1, 1972, the courthouse demolition began in earnest and the "grassroots campaign that tried to save it ended in defeat," in the words of one newspaper account. "Young and elderly women wept, teenagers jeered and mature men cursed under their breath," it was reported. Several hundred people came to the demolition, and policemen were stationed around the site, but their services proved unnecessary.

Though the attempts to save the beautiful courthouse failed, the controversy made a potent point. The people of St. Clair County did not fully appreciate the historic architecture of one of their most interesting buildings until they had to envision the county without it. Consequently, by the time they put all their resources together to try to save it, it was already too late. And to the great consternation of many county residents, they had to watch its symbolic limestone columns and hospitable portico fall. [From *Belleville News-Democrat*, Apr. 19, May 10, May 11, May 15, May 18, May 31, 1972; H. W. Janson, *History of Art*; Frederick Koeper, *Illinois Architecture*, *Metro East Journal*, May 4, June 2, 1972; Alvin Nebelsick, *A History of Belleville*, A.A. Wilderman and A. S. Wilderman, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois*.]